

## **Become a “Thought Leader” and Separate Yourself from the Pack**

**By Ken Lizotte**

Lately the age-old business development dilemma of how to stand out from the crowd has been haunting professional service firms more than ever before. All too many services nowadays look all too much alike, with marketing strategies seemingly unable to distinguish them from their competition. Glossy brochures, snazzy websites, press releases, advertising: when everyone employs the same methods, everyone ends up vying for the same narrow window of client and prospect attention.

To escape this marketing black hole, many financial consultants have adopted an uncommon strategy that elevates both principal and firm above the fray. This approach positions the firm’s expert professionals as “thought leaders.”

Names of superstar thought leaders are not only well known but the stuff of legend: Bill Gates, Tom Peters, Richard Braniff, Martha Stewart, to name a few. Rather than abandoning marketing to a marketing department, they inject themselves into the heart of the process, churning out books,

articles, conference speeches, media interviews to keep their visibility machines boiling. Amid the resulting excitement and industry debate, they simultaneously personalize their company, expand their products' exposure, and deepen both market share and loyalty from their customers.

Richard Braniff, for example, has taken his Virgin conglomerate literally to new heights by attempting such stunts as piloting an air balloon around the world. Martha Stewart, despite her legal troubles, has made herself and her firm rich beyond words by melting away the branding lines that traditionally divide a company's products from a CEO's personality. These are only two examples of results the process can produce.

This capacity to reach beyond traditional marketing approaches is available to us all, a process that only needs to be committed to and then implemented within often-ignored channels. There are two main vehicles to employ: (a) publishing articles and/or books, and (b) delivering talks and presentations. Such center-spotlight marketing attracts attention and recognition from a target market in ways that more commonplace marketing tools cannot attain.

Dan Cassidy, President of Argus Consulting Ltd (Concord MA) and a longtime SOA member, has published articles in leading HR and benefits planning journal in the US, Canada and the U.K. Attendant publicity

around these publishing credits has led to Cassidy being interviewed by such high-profile media outlets as The Street.Com, Institutional Investor and Wall Street Journal Radio. As a result, Cassidy is known beyond the borders of his own client/prospect community for his benefits planning expertise and never fails to call attention to these media credits when strategically advantageous occasions arise, such as during a marketing campaign or even in the midst of an actual sales call.

Given thought leadership's competitive advantages, taking the plunge would seem to be a no-brainer. Yet many consultants hesitate out of fear that the process will not work for them, or out of ignorance of where to begin. Yet embarking on just two simple stages will get the process moving in the right direction, building confidence as the effort succeeds.

Stage One: Publish your ideas as articles in business publications, a seemingly daunting task until this challenge is broken down into baby steps. First, compose a list of article ideas that align with your business objectives. Ask yourself: Which services do I most wish to promote? What expertise/service do I most want to be known for? Are there services even my oldest customers may not realize my company has to offer? Your answers will translate into publishing ideas.

Next, after answering such questions, go searching for an editor who sees a fit for your ideas with her publication. Pitch to magazines read by decision-makers who typically hire your firm or by referral sources that can spread word of mouth about your firm. Create this list using library directories or by searching the Web.

Example: You offer actuarial services primarily to high technology start-ups companies. You pitch an idea titled “Five Biggest Financial Mistakes of Hi-Tech Start-Ups” to Hi Tech CFO Magazine (fictitious name).

What’s important to realize at this point is that business editors out there regularly depend on professionals just like you to feed them publishable ideas. After all, they only can know what to publish in their pages as a result of input from those of us on the “front lines.” So don’t underestimate the publishability of your day-to-day knowledge, expertise, value or insights. Ideas that might seem mundane may be viewed as among the best-kept leading edge secrets in the business world when you share them with an editor.

After you getting published, Stage Two involves speaking at business events. Some engagements may come about because a conference planner read your article and invited you to come and speak about it, but most gigs will get arranged when you actively leverage your published works. Send

email announcements to your private business e-list, send a news release announcing your published articles, post the article on your company's website, pass out your article to customers, colleagues, prospects, employees, even vendors. Don't sit around and wait for people to see it, instead leap into action, insuring that your work gets read. Build a buzz!

At your actual talks, always distribute your article for free, promoting your availability as a speaker too. And when you get offered any kind of speaking gig, don't turn it down! Larry Winget, a highly sought-after motivational speaker, has stated, "The very best way to get speaking engagements is to simply go out and speak!" Exposure breeds exposure, exponentially growing your speaking schedule. Speaking can then lead to more article assignments as you never know when an editor may be sitting out there in your audience and loving what you have to say.

By taking these actions, your credibility (and that of your firm) will leapfrog over that of your competitors. Third party "endorsements" from publications and conference planners will solidly establish you as an author/speaker and a leading thinker in your field, elevating your firm's services as well. Once this happens, bona fide thought leadership will have officially arrived. From there on, enjoy the ride!

Ken Lizotte is Chief Imaginative Officer (CIO) of emerson consulting group inc. (Concord MA) which transforms consultants and professional service firms into “thought leaders.” Phone: 978-371-0442. Email: [ken@thoughtleading.com](mailto:ken@thoughtleading.com) Website: [www.thoughtleading.com](http://www.thoughtleading.com)